



Idaho Charter School Network

SENATE EDUCATION

EXHIBIT NO. 3

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ICSN BOARD

April 4, 2011

Laurie Wolfe  
IDEA Charter  
President

Dear Senator Zinke & Honorable Legislators of Montana,

Alan Millar  
Sandpoint Charter  
President Elect

I am pleased to address you on behalf of the charter school community of Idaho. As your northwest neighbor, we share an appreciation of open spaces, spirited and innovative citizens and family values. As you engage in a dialogue about the goodness of fit of charter schools for Montana, I would share with you some of the lessons we have learned since 1998 when our charter law was passed, and the many ways that charter schools have strengthened education and broadened opportunities for our students and their families.

Glenn Mabile  
Coeur d'Alene Charter  
Treasurer

Teresa England  
Anser Charter School  
Secretary

The Charter School Act was passed in Idaho in 1998 and we have seen slow and steady growth in the number of charter schools over the last 12 years. Currently, we have 40 schools in 20 different communities and 7 virtual state-wide charter schools. Approximately 15,000 students, or 5% of the market share of youngsters, is enrolled in a charter school. Like Montana, Idaho is comprised of mostly small, rural communities. Charter schools are distributed throughout the state, in communities of various sizes. Their development has been in response to a perceived need in the community and thus, they continue to represent a small percent of our student population. We know that traditional public schools do a great job educating most students; however, some students, in spite of their efforts, are not successful. A 2009 study of Idaho's charter schools found that parents chose charter schools for three primary reasons - philosophy of the school, small school or class size, and safe school environment. As we guarantee every young citizen a free and appropriate education, we must acknowledge that some children learn differently, that some need special accommodations and that for some, a large school or the experience of being bullied can make a child feel unsafe. Parents and children deserve a choice that will promote their academic and personal success.

Fred Ball  
Blackfoot Charter

Cindy Hoovel  
Garden City Charter

Andrew Meyer  
Taylor's Crossing Charter

Monti Pittman  
iSucceed Charter

Nancy Smith  
College of Idaho

Michelle Taylor  
State Dept of Education

Cody Claver  
K-12  
Immediate Past Pres.

Charter schools offer a number of very important opportunities to our students in Idaho. Several of our schools focus primarily on high school drop outs - a problem nationwide. Our state leaders, like yours, want to see every student finish high school and become a responsible and contributing citizen. Kootenai Bridge Academy in Coeur d'Alene and Richard McKenna High School in Mountain Home are successful examples of innovative programs that reach those students and have an impressive impact on increasing graduation rates and enrollment in secondary education. National studies show that students who attended charter high schools were more likely to receive a diploma and attend college. At Coeur d'Alene Academy, 95% of the seniors go on to college, more than double our state average.

Students with special learning needs are served well in all our public schools, yet, many struggle to fit in and get the personal support that would make their academic career a positive experience. Several small charter schools throughout our state are having amazing results with students who have special needs, like those on the autism spectrum, whose parents had often resorted to home-schooling. Charter schools have the opportunity to create a culture of acceptance, teaching all students that tolerance isn't enough. Only when we

include all children who may have learning or behavioral differences, in every aspect of school life, can we experience the richness that a diverse student body offers. We know that this can only be accomplished when adults are intentional about full inclusion. By giving teachers the freedom to innovate and try new ways to improve student achievement, attendance and satisfaction, charter schools are developing successful new teaching models that work.

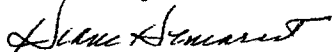
In the Northwest, perhaps more so than in other regions, we experience large number of children who are home-schooled. We appreciate the lengths to which parents will go in their commitments to their families. Still, we owe it to those parents and students to support their efforts with high quality, standards-based education assistance so that they are ready for post-secondary employment or academics. Our 2009 study showed that at least 30% of the students in 'brick and mortar' charter schools were previously home-schooled and over 5,000 charter school students are currently enrolled in one of the seven virtual charter schools in Idaho. This is a testament to high parent involvement. Virtual charter schools provide an array of delivery models and curricula for parents to choose from so that they can continue to be very active and insure that their education choice is the best fit for their student and family.

Charter schools are unique public schools that foster a partnership between parents, teachers and students to create an environment in which parents can be more involved, teachers are given the freedom to innovate and students are provided the structure they need to learn with all three held accountable for improved student achievement. Just like traditional public schools, charter schools are free and do not have special entrance requirements.

Decision makers in Montana may have some of the same concerns that we in Idaho have had; that is, our state demographics seem to have little in common with Los Angeles, New York City or Washington, DC. While not resembling the profiles of urban American schools, we knew that Idaho students could do better. National data shows that charter students are twice as likely to score proficient or advanced ratings on reading and math tests; and, data from Idaho State assessments over five years showed that charter students performed better academically when compared with other students in non-charter public schools. The same study showed that 97% of students, parents and teachers who responded to a survey, were happy with their charter schools.

We know that all students are capable of learning and achieving. As part of our duty and guarantee to our citizens, we need to respond if a traditional public school is not addressing a student's needs. Charter schools offer parents another public school option. High-quality public charter schools are making a difference for students and need to be expanded. Both Republican and Democratic governors across the country see charter schools as part of the long-term solution to improving public education. The charter school community in Idaho urges decision makers in Montana to make the charter opportunity available to your students, parents and teachers. We support you in your effort to innovate and improve education for all and we eagerly await your success.

Respectfully,



Diane L. Demarest, M.Ed.  
Executive Director